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The Anatomy of Coaching: Coaching Through Storytelling

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Literacy coaching is a laudable topic that currently pervades professional literature and conferences of the educational community. Information about the beliefs, techniques and challenges of coaching is proliferating, and a common element that emerges from the research is the need for an interpersonal, trusting relationship between the coach and classroom teacher (e.g. Barkley, 2005; Dozier, 2006; Duncan, 2006; Hasbrouck & Denton, 2005; Toll, 2005). The dilemma that then arises for the trainers of coaches is how does one teach a coach to build interpersonal relationships with teachers?

After a recent interaction with a resident in a nursing home, I came to believe that one way coaches can begin building cohesive relationships is through the structure of storytelling. Using the structure of a story as a method, literacy coaches may grasp the importance of trust, and reconsider the anatomy of a coaching experience. Although my experience at the nursing home, highlighted in this article, did not take place in the classroom, many valuable parallels still exist, and it is through the analysis of this experience that the vital link between storytelling and coaching is examined.

I begin by dissecting the elements of storytelling, relating each to crucial aspects of literacy coaching. I then use storytelling techniques to relay my personal experience as an illustration. Finally, I will compare my anecdote of Lucy's story with a story common to many teachers, showing that not only story structures, but coaching themes, may transcend disciplinary boundaries.

Part I: Storytelling: A Template for Building Coaching Relationships

When I tell stories, I am engaged in a time-honored tradition of teaching and learning. Our ancestors, prior to the invention of the printing press, learned from the oral storytelling practiced in their cultures. Through the generations, people have gathered knowledge and established traditions based upon the stories told to them by their forefathers. Storytelling brings cultures together. Whether in church, at a family reunion, at a therapy session, during a classroom lesson or business meeting, or at a large conference, men, women, boys and girls respond to stories. Coles, in his landmark book, *The Call of Stories* (1989), invites readers to consider storytelling when probing to the core of any concern or issue. He encourages storytelling to understand the context of a person and a situation in lieu of engaging in a question-answer interview, which can result in fragmented bits and details.

Applying Coles' perspective on storytelling to ideas about literacy coaching, the organization of story grammar then becomes a useful way for literacy coaches to learn the

“story” of a classroom teacher, and effectively places her/him in a better position to assist the teacher. Primary and secondary teachers already use story grammar as an organizational template to focus on the elements of a narrative, and the familiarity of story grammar lends itself easily as a tool to which literacy educators can relate. Every narrative has a setting, plot, characters, conflict, attempts to solve the conflict, and a resolution.

With this in mind, I invite coaches to consider story grammar as a way to learn about the classroom teacher and in so doing, develop the groundwork for a positive and trusting literacy coach-teacher relationship. After all, every coach meets the teacher at some point in the teacher’s story. By examining the elements of the teacher’s story, a coach will be more likely to learn the larger context of the personal as well as the professional story, better situating the coach to assist the teacher, and ultimately the students. In the sections that follow, I will illustrate how this can happen.

Setting

A narrative occurs within a setting or a variety of settings. When a coach meets a teacher, attention to the setting is critical. Is it warm and inviting, or is the surrounding environment filled with tension, or bustling around with nervous energy? The setting includes such factors as time and place, in addition to those related to the environment. The possibilities are endless, and loaded with meaning and opportunity. Every current setting also is influenced to some degree by past experiences. Even if a coach finds her/himself in a setting she/he has yet to experience, the coach must formulate an idea of how to perform based on how she/he has operated previously.

To be “in the moment” of a coaching setting, the coach must assess the various characteristics of the educational environment. Very few settings in schools and educational communities are ideal. For example, time and resources are often limited, teaching and learning are impacted by less than ideal physical facilities, and teachers’ morale can be depressed by the burden of institutional expectations and restraints. The coach is the person who takes the initiative to understand and accept the setting in order to take the lead in solving problems in spite of potential drawbacks.

Characters

The strategy for coaching in any setting requires a focus on the characters—the coach, the educator who is being coached, the pupils who learn in that classroom, and other staff and specialists who are assigned to that classroom. In every story, characters interact, so in the case of the literacy coach and teacher, developing a trusting professional relationship is necessary to assist a teacher in successfully navigating the “land mines” of the uneven terrain of the school environment. While the coach may be instrumental in securing better environmental conditions for the teacher, playing the role of a supporting character, the coach will accomplish long-term success by attending to more than the environmental needs of the teacher. Even an ideal environment with sufficient time, resources, and facilities is of no value if the educator is not able to use them to the best advantage for student achievement.

The teacher, of course, is the main character. It is unusual to find a teacher who is able to close the classroom door and keep it closed in these days of diversity and multi-leveled programming, so all teaching stories include a varied cast of characters. A classroom teacher may be the “general practitioner” of the class, but all teachers need the knowledge and advice of

other stakeholders, or characters, in specialty areas to support the educational endeavors of all students.

Style

Style, or how the story is told, is a crucial element. In the story of the classroom teacher, style can mean the difference between successful literacy coach-teacher relationships and failing ones. Communication among practitioners and congruence among programs are critical factors in student achievement and successful schools, but the attainment of these stylistic ideals is easier said than done. Communication includes a series of dialogues between at least two people who rotate turns as speakers and listeners, both of which are skills that need to be learned and honed. Unfortunately, in a society that is so bombarded with information at a rapid-fire pace, it is difficult to find moments for authentic speaking and listening. Consequently, coaches need to master the skills of speaking and listening in cultivating their coaching style.

Speaking includes the use of language that expresses ideas clearly, precisely, and concisely. Tone and phrasing become important factors in successful communication. Active listening, a type of listening that goes beyond ignoring, pretend listening, and selective listening, also becomes a vital skill for coaches. Active listening occurs when the listener focuses closely on what the speaker is saying and processes the information thoroughly so it can be remembered and used constructively (i.e. in a coaching situation). Further, empathic listening is active listening that includes the presence of feeling and emotion. For the coach, authentic, active listening is the goal, using empathic listening in situations that extend into the personal as well as professional experience of a teacher. This kind of listening can help coaches understand the structure of stories they hear and tell in their coaching practices.

Participating in this process with the teacher, the coach is not only practicing effective communication skills, but is also modeling the elements of successful communication. While the coach may be skilled in the fine art of conversation, coaching requires much more. The coaching relationship spans a period of time, and problems that need resolution through the coaching relationship require multiple conversations (Barkley, 2005; Cummins, 2006; Dozier, 2006; McAndrew, 2005). Even the coach who is well-versed in conversational skills must realize and plan for the ways in which conversations can be difficult and troublesome in the pursuit of progress over time (Stone, Patten & Heen, 1999). A coach must be able to take the lead in maintaining a forum for conversations, and when conversations become difficult, exercise some risk-taking in return for continued conversations. If the coach does not accept the responsibility for maintaining continual conversation, the communication process will likely break down and be compromised, jeopardizing the coaching relationship. Stone, Patton, and Heen (1999), in their book *Difficult conversations*, explain how a conversation is really three conversations in one: the 'what happened conversation,' the 'feelings conversation,' and the 'identity conversation.' The 'what happened conversation' includes the words said, not said, and interpreted in various ways. Assumptions get created about the truth (each speaker thinks he/she is speaking the truth), the intentions, known and unknown, of the speakers, and the assignment of blame. The 'feelings conversation' acknowledges the presence of feelings within each conversation and discusses how to handle the emotions that arise. The 'identity conversation' includes introspection about each speaker perceives herself within the context of the conversation. In this conversation, words and sentences get spoken in ways that both present a desired image and protect one's self-esteem. An examination into this taxonomy provides a deeper insight into the complexity of conversations

and implies that conversationalists must practice and refine the skills of conversations to achieve successful communications. This becomes the style of the coach-teacher story.

Plot

In a narrative, the plot focuses on the actions that occur in a story. Once the setting and characters are introduced, the plot emerges, usually with a presentation of a conflict or problem. Once the problem is introduced, the story weaves through various attempts to solve the problem before finally coming to a resolution. The resolution may be positive, negative or neutral. The ongoing coaching of a classroom teacher is central to the plot of a story.

Problems that coaches seek to resolve take many forms. When the coach is familiar with the setting, has a beginning basis for a developing trusting relationship with the teacher, and is aware of the personnel within a specific situation, the ability to focus on resolution is easier; it is not a convoluted plot. The teacher or the coach sees a clear issue that has presented itself in the classroom, and in this instance, the coach may take the lead in ascertaining what specifically is not working in the literacy instruction and why. A coach works with an objective eye and ear in order to initiate this precise investigation. Alternatively, a more complex plot may present itself. It may be true that previous attempts to resolve a problem have not been successful and a new approach must be tried. The plot's eventual resolution may be embedded in these previous attempts to resolve the problem. Because the coach has collected ongoing data and has the unique skills to apply this to the current classroom problem, she/he is able to follow the plot and use the appropriate style to achieve a workable resolution for all of the characters. Again, the coach arrives with the objective eye and ear but with a mind that is attuned to the contextual factors unique to this situation. The plot of the coaching story can be unpredictable, but the prepared coach can help the teacher come to the most appropriate resolution, even if the path is sometimes winding.

Conflict

Conflict exists in every story. In the teacher's story, the coach attempts to alleviate the conflict, as good supporting characters do, by initiating problem solving -- listening acutely and guiding the teacher to a precise articulation of the problem (Toll, 2005; Toll, 2006; Hasbrouck & Denton, 2005; Duncan, 2006). This process may involve numerous focused conversations as well as casual dialogues during unexpected encounters. The coach becomes a questioner, leading the investigation of what has occurred, what goal is desired, and how the path from the present state to the desired goal can be traveled. The coach needs to find a strategy to maintain an appropriate pace that responds to the need of the teachers, who vary in their level of processing time in attempts to solve their problems. The intention, of course, is to seek a solution that allows the student or students to achieve the learning goals. Johnston eloquently summarizes this role in the forward of Dozier's book, *Responsive Literacy Coaching* (2006). He explains:

Responsive coaching requires the development of an eye for what to notice in teachers; an active, yet patient ear for learning where they are coming from; and a tongue that is not hasty and carries a language of growth, reflection and agency. (p. viii)

A coach must also assist the teacher to become a deeper thinker and a more insightful, independent educator. The coach continues the process of helping the teacher develop more strategies to resolve the problem until one of the attempts becomes the resolution. The coach

doesn't necessarily provide more approaches to resolving the problem, nor does she simply invite the teacher to try certain strategies. Yes, the coach will reach into her reservoir of suggestions for ideas appropriate to this particular problem, but in a true coaching model, the coach will use collaborative inquiries that will lead the teacher to develop an understanding of other perspectives on the problem and therefore, new approaches to try. The coach is eager to help the teacher develop into a deeper thinker and independent, constructivist educator, to help the teacher reach the hero status that her character warrants. That goal will not be attained if the coach becomes just a reservoir of suggestions to pass on to teachers.

Resolution

Most narratives conclude when the resolution is reached. Whereas in a narrative, the resolution may be happy, sad, bittersweet or even neutral leaving the reader with a question and hoping for a sequel, the resolution in a coaching situation is much more critical. Coaching resolutions involve teachers and students, real people involved in real life instead of fictional characters. The resolutions are successful when student achievement is increased, and often these successes are not immediately evident. With every resolution, another piece of the master "Story" has been told. The teacher's story has developed into one with multiple parts, and the coach contributes an important piece of the story, as well as having her/his own. These stories interweave to create a larger whole. Both the teacher and the coach can use this larger story, and all its component parts, for future coaching and teaching experiences.

Sometimes stories come to us in chapter form or anthologies. For the coach and teacher, there will always be a sequel. The process of teaching and coaching always moves from one story to the next, connecting and learning from what has come before. The coach always operates within a teacher's setting, interacts with a cast of characters, confronts problems, seeks ways to guide teachers toward resolutions and finally, with expert communication skills, arrives at the destination called resolution.

Part II: A Story of Coaching

The categories discussed in the previous section can apply to many different types of stories, which can explore other ideas of what being a coach can mean. Even the story of an everyday event has things to tell us about what it means to be a literacy coach. In the coaching story that follows for example, Lucy enjoys holiday cookies and punch because I, as a personal coach, attended to the setting, the needs of the primary character, and the careful selection of an appropriate intervention during the plot. We overcame conflict and came to a successful resolution in this simple example of how coaching can work:

I was invited to tell holiday stories in a nursing home of elderly and sick Catholic sisters. While familiar with the nursing home, having been there before with family and friends, I only knew a couple of residents. On the day of the program I played merry carols on a keyboard, knowing that the music was being transmitted throughout the hallways, serving as a welcome to the residents led from their rooms. They came in their wheelchairs, with walkers and canes, and leaning on the arms of staff members. I smiled at each one, attempting to make a connection. With the holiday lights and decorations, cheery music, and friendly greetings among the residents, the room took on a warm and comfortable atmosphere.

I noticed one elderly woman in particular who struggled to walk, leaning heavily on the arms of a staff person. She winced with pain as she lowered herself in the chair. Once she was positioned, she noticed me. We made eye contact. Smiling at one another, an important connection was made. Unbeknownst to me, I would change from a musician and storyteller to her personal coach moments later.

I began the program by inviting the group to join in the singing of some carols. Afterwards, I told a short, happy story. We sang more carols, and I shared a longer story. A few more carols, and it was time to adjourn to the dining room for Christmas cookies and punch. Throughout the program, I frequently glanced at the woman sitting directly across from me. She always smiled as I spoke and tapped her feet when I played music. After the program, I went with the residents as they moved toward the dining room. I walked immediately to the lady who had kept her eyes on me throughout the program. I held out my arms to her and said, "What's your name?" She replied, "Lucy".

"Let's go for some cookies and punch!" I suggested enthusiastically.

Lucy smiled, reached toward me, and attempted to stand up. But she did not have the strength to stand. It was at that moment that I transitioned from helpful program performer to Lucy's individual coach. Once I saw that Lucy could not lift herself, I knew that I needed to assist her, and more importantly, I knew I had the skills to help her get out of the chair. I had the knowledge to make a difference, however small, in this woman's quality of daily life.

Lucy sank back down into the chair after her first attempt to rise, keeping her eyes locked with mine. I continued to smile and enthusiastically said, "Let's try again!" This time I was ready. I dug my heels into the floor, tightly squeezed my gluts and abs, flexed my arms and waited for her to lift herself. I could feel her attempting to rise, then felt her strength give way. At the very moment when her strength waned, the strength that I had marshaled took over. The strength in my arms, supported by the firm grounding of my torso and feet, transferred to her arms, which allowed her to move upward and come to a standing position. It only took a few moments, but it was enough time for me to sense completely the feeling of being in someone's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1979). I was in a coaching position. Meeting a person where they are is a key characteristic of being an effective coach, literacy or otherwise.

As soon as Lucy was on her feet, I continued my enthusiasm. "We did it! Let's go find the cookies!" She echoed, "We did it" and allowed me to place her arm securely under mine so she could safely walk. We proceeded to the dining room and as we passed the refreshment table, I enjoyed a glimpse into Lucy's more mischievous side as she sneaked a small cookie into her mouth with her free hand. The interpersonal skills I demonstrated were just as important as any knowledge I had about how to solve the problem.

As I was collecting my materials to leave, I heard Lucy's name in a conversation among a few staff members and residents. The staff informed me that the day was an exciting and memorable event because Lucy hardly ever smiled. She spent most of her days in a wheelchair, crying. They noticed that as soon as she heard music in the hallway, she brightened and allowed a staff member to walk her in to the activity room. They observed this transformation to a happy person during the program. I was able to use their feedback as evaluative data to understand that I had been an effective coach.

I have spent considerable time thinking about Lucy. I would not be so bold to think that I alone made this event such a happy and successful one for her. No, but I was the one who, when all the other factors worked together, provided the coaching necessary for her to participate in this holiday event.

Part III: The Anatomy of Coaching

What caused Lucy to smile? And how is her smile connected to classroom coaching? I invite the reader to consider the following ideas that bear implications for all coaches of classroom teachers. First, the environment was set for Lucy's success. The hallways rang with holiday music that somehow resonated with her and evoked a feeling of pleasure and happiness. One wonders how music may have been a strong force in her memory that triggered a sense of happiness. Perhaps the music fostered a motivation for her to find the source, and she allowed herself to be led to the activity room. Certainly the brightly colored decorations, the happy spirits of other residents, and attention to her physical needs of rest, nourishment and care contributed to create a ready disposition for a successful experience. Lucy was ready for a different, happy experience that would not include sadness and crying—the setting provided the right backdrop.

For the classroom coach, there are lessons to be learned here about the readiness of the teacher. Given a different day with different circumstances, Lucy may not have been ready for this positive event. If she had not been ready and willing for the coaching to occur, no amount of smiling, enthusiastic encouragement, singing or storytelling would have led to Lucy to participate. Whatever the vast array of contextual factors in place, a teacher must be at a certain state of readiness, which will create an opportunity for her to participate successfully in a coaching session.

With readiness and opportunity at hand, a coach must then determine what the requirements of the teacher and the classroom issue are. In the situation with Lucy, as in any situation with a teacher, a coach first needs to be aware and sensitive to what the person being coached can and cannot do. Further, in some situations, as in mine with Lucy, a coach cannot afford to spend any time contemplating what a teacher cannot do. It is absolutely necessary that once an assessment was made, the intervention immediately begins. What was the intervention in the case of Lucy? An intervention is always intended to achieve the goal, and in this case, the goal was for Lucy to transport herself to the dining room where she could enjoy punch and holiday cookies. The goal was unattainable for her unless someone came forward with an intervention. A variety of interventions were available to me. My role was to be knowledgeable of and confident in the possible interventions, critically assess the advantages and disadvantages of each, and choose one that would match the person I am coaching.

In my intervention with Lucy, I chose to transfer my own body strength to her so she could make it her own and push herself up to a standing position. With a quick mental assessment, I knew it would be more time efficient. I wouldn't have to inquire about availability of walkers or wheelchairs. And, I knew I could do it. I've been engaged in regular aerobic exercise for more than twenty years. I had confidence that when I placed my body in a strong and correct stance, I could use that strength to help Lucy accomplish with my strength what she could not do with her own. Strong knowledge of one's own skills and resources create interventions that are both timely and effective. If I had not had this strong knowledge in the situation with Lucy, I would have been forced to choose an alternative intervention that would not have been as time effective.

Timing is a critical factor in coaching interventions. Lucy spends most of her days in a chair bound and depressed state. But, the music and the joyfulness of this event fueled her spirit. The intervention had to be implemented quickly and positively for Lucy to continue the process. If I had had to look for a chair or walker, the opportunity to intervene would have passed too quickly and Lucy may have lapsed again into the familiar world of depression and failure. Further, I had eye contact with Lucy from the very first instant of the incident and I could not allow that eye contact to be broken. I also deliberately spoke with hope, anticipation and eagerness when I cried, "Let's try it again!" At that moment I was confident that I had her willingness to try again. She was having success and she was willing to trust me to maintain the success. If I had turned away, released her from my arms to secure a chair or walker, I may have lost her confidence, trust and desire. I would have had to regain all of that once I returned with a chair or walker. This same process of sensitive analysis, quick determination and implementation of a strategy from an established repertoire of strategies is used by the coach with a classroom teacher.

Once Lucy was on her feet, she was still only one-third of the way to attaining her goal. There was the long trek down the hallway to the dining room, then positioning herself at a table to wait for cookies and punch. I was committed to the entire process of coaching. There was no turning back for me. This does not mean that I became indispensable. I could have transferred her to another staff person to help Lucy complete her goal. But transferring her to another staff person (or coach) would have been risky. Lucy and I had developed a coaching relationship, and by the firmness with which she held on to my arm, I knew she had confidence that we were on our way to the goal of cookies and punch. What if I had turned away from her and given her over to another person—even an equally capable person? Would she falter physically and reach for a chair? Would she be emotionally disappointed that she could not complete this goal with the support of someone she now trusted? Lucy had given me her trust. Trust is a very special gift and once it is handed to a coach, it must be held as sacred. Holding a person's trust is critical for establishing, developing and maintaining a coaching relationship.

There is a significant difference between this coaching experience with Lucy and that of a classroom coach: I knew I should never leave Lucy alone or without support. Her frail condition would not allow her to be independent. Getting cookies and punch was an appropriate developmental goal for her. This is unlike the situation of a coach who coaches a classroom teacher toward a proximal goal for student achievement but who also nudges the teacher toward independence. Indeed, the coach needs to understand thoroughly the process of the gradual release of responsibility to know at what exact moments the coach should transfer the ability to the teacher, when to intervene with a bit more knowledge, and when to withdraw support, allowing the teacher to be independent. The coach must remain in the role and exercise patience about staying with the process until its resolution. Finally, the coach had to believe in the process. This belief includes the confidence that the selected intervention would work. The coach never would claim that any strategy or approach would become an answer for this teacher in this situation for all times. An intervention used by this coach for this teacher and this set of contextual factors may be successful. It may never be successful again, or it may become an intervention that can be successful every time with this teacher or other teachers with similar contextual factors.

What about the other people who were present in the environment while coaching was in progress? In the situation with Lucy, the room was filled with other residents and various professionals (nurses, therapists, health administrators, visitors). The majority of these people

were much more acquainted with Lucy than I was. What if they had viewed my intervention, and, fearing a stranger would not understand this person, stepped in and stopped my intervention? If that had occurred, I probably would have surrendered my place in the intervention to someone else who knew Lucy better than I would be better able to help her attain her goal. The outcome could have been just as successful if I had not continued with the intervention. Actually, the observers did have to take a risk to allow this unknown practitioner to perform an intervention on one of their patients. What did I do in my short program, and what did they interpret as spectators that allowed them to take this risk? While I was interacting with the whole group, I established my credibility with the staff and residents, which allowed me to be accepted into their community. I did have the advantage of being familiar with some members in the audience and having a positive name association with others. The classroom coach has the challenge of building trust and credibility, not only with individual teachers but entire faculties. The coach who is new to the school or district has different challenges than the coach who has longevity and an established position in the school community.

Another aspect of an intervention to consider is the possibility of a “false start” or an intervention that has to be abandoned because it clearly is not allowing the teacher to progress toward the goal. An intervention that may be justifiably chosen with a clear rationale for its choice may emerge as one that will not be successful with the initial actions. But once the initial actions are modified, it can be successful. This “false start” can be a stumbling block to the process, but one that is manageable. Ceasing the intervention must be done without conveying the message that the case is without merit. What if I had begun my intervention with Lucy but soon discovered that I did not possess the necessary strength or stamina that I thought I had? How would I have withdrawn the intervention with minimal damage to her state of readiness? What is the etiquette for a coach who needs to withdraw an intervention? Further, what if an intervention is not successful, but the coach is so committed to the belief that this intervention works, that the coach refuses to cease the intervention? Is there an intervention for a faulty or unsuccessful intervention? We all know educators who are so committed to a program or strategy that they either don’t notice or don’t know what to do when learners have limited success.

The ability to develop, foster and maintain relationships is a complex and difficult skill for educators to accrue. This ability is not always readily found in student teachers and novice teachers, but it is gained over time, during the maturation process and experience in the classroom. Even for veteran educators, a career in a classroom may have fine-tuned their knowledge of curriculum and pedagogy, but it has not prepared them as well for the professional relationships needed for a coaching relationship with a peer. The intention of PART II of this essay is to provide the reader with a template for developing a coaching relationship. The procedure is taken from what we know of story grammar (the organization of narratives) and is incorporated with storytelling techniques to provide the coach with a more thorough understanding of the teacher. This will, in turn, allow the coaching relationship to be more positive, authentic and successful.

Part IV: Implications for Coaches

Through the sharing of this story, I realized another dimension of coaching. Coaching includes the critical element of “lifting up.” I was able to lift Lucy physically during my coaching experience with her. The idea of “lifting up” is figuratively appropriate as coaches too

become the support and let the teacher become the one “out in front” accomplishing the work. In an era of competition it may be difficult for literacy coaches to develop the habit of becoming less visible so the teacher can become empowered. The habit is only developed as the coach reaches deep within his or her soul and examines motives for coaching. To be a coach who cares more for empowering the teacher to become the “star” rather than promoting herself requires the development of what Palmer (1998) refers to as the inner landscape, or what happens within us as we navigate our external world. It is the quest for developing the inner landscape that allows coaches to truly work within the teacher’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1979), doing what will allow the teacher to enhance his or her expertise without seeking the limelight for oneself.

The position of literacy coach is multi-faceted and challenging. Each coaching situation is unique with contextual factors, professional and personal, that may inhibit progress. My experience with Lucy allowed me to understand the complexities of coaching in a new way, as did looking at this experience through the structure of the story. The moral in this case is that the wise coach always begins with the development of a trusting interpersonal relationship. In sharing my story of Lucy, I encourage coaches to learn the unique story of each classroom teacher and use it to foster the coaching relationship.

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